

Handout #2: A Brief on Focus Groups

Focus Groups Versus Interviews

Focus Groups	Interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather many opinions in a fairly short amount of time. • Information comes from the group rather than one person's experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather more in-depth information from individuals; includes one-on-one interviews. • May take more time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderator's role is to guide the participants and conversations that go off track. • The moderator has less control; participants have more control of the discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewer has more control of the outcome; participant has less control. • Moderator can more easily keep people to the subject of the interview.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants may feel inhibited by the group. They may not be comfortable giving information to a group or want to state an opinion that conflicts with what others have said. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants may answer based on what they think the interviewer wants. • Participants may feel the need to defend a response.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants may remember something or develop a comment based on another person's response. • Group interaction may be helpful for topics that people do not often think about. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants are not influenced by their peers. They answer questions based on memory of their own experience.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups are useful when exploring a new topic area. • May lead to a question guide for follow-up in-depth interviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews can give general reactions and thoughts about a fairly new topic. • The information from the interviews can be checked with focus groups to see if there is common ground.

The Participants

A focus group is most often a uniform group of strangers. The fact that it is a uniform group helps you better analyze the results. It also increases trust and the comfort level, which allows the participants to speak more openly. Group dynamics can also be affected by whether participants are strangers or know each other. People most often talk about an experience more thoroughly when talking among strangers. They may be less comfortable doing so among those they know, especially if the topic is a sensitive one.

Be sure to:

- Find out where/how you can recruit participants for your study question
- Recruit similar people from many different sources
- Divide participants into groups based on background, sex, race, age, etc.

The Moderator

The moderator will need to decide his or her level of involvement in the group.

- **High Involvement**—The moderator actively takes part in the discussion. He or she shares experiences and asks several questions during the focus group session.
- **Moderate Involvement**—The moderator asks questions and keeps the conversation on the subject. He or she does not share comments or personal experiences and does not take part very much in the conversation.
- **Low Involvement**—The moderator asks questions and allows participants to converse. He or she does not add comments in the conversation. Occasionally he or she will ask a follow-up question or change the subject if the discussion slows.

Regardless of the extent of involvement, the moderator should:

- Be of similar sex, race, and background as the participants. Keep in mind that this may disqualify you from being the moderator.
- Briefly introduce himself or herself and the topic
- Briefly identify focus group etiquette, e.g., no side conversations, okay to disagree but not okay to criticize
- Begin the conversation with introductions:
 - May start with a discussion question about the topic, e.g., “What do you think is the most important health issue affecting women?”
- Be aware of what participants are (and are not) saying—use this information to phrase follow-up questions
 - “Many of you mentioned . . . Tell me a little bit more about this.”
 - “No one has mentioned . . . Does . . . not matter?”
- Provide a clear conclusion to the focus group: “We are now done.”

The moderator should not indicate the specific information that he or she wants about the topic. This may have an effect on the conversation and create biased findings.

Focus Group Structure

More structured focus groups:

- Commonly used with a clearly defined objective or outcome
- Must have a strict/consistent question guide among all the focus groups conducted for the topic
- Demand high moderator involvement
- Focus on what the researcher wants to hear versus what the participants want to share
- Disadvantage: more limited data.

Moderately structured focus groups (Funnel structure):

- Most ideal structure for focus group
- Begin with broad, less structured questioning
- Move into specific, more structured questioning.

Less structured focus groups:

- More appropriate for research topics that have not been studied before
- Require an open-ended, flexible question guide
- Demand low moderator involvement
- Focus on what the participants want to share versus what the researcher wants to hear
- Disadvantage: hard to make comparisons among the focus groups.

Typically, an ideal size is about 6 to 10 participants for each focus group.

- Large focus groups:
 - Less individual involvement
 - Risk of large group breaking into smaller conversations or more than one person trying to speak at once
 - Require more moderator involvement to keep group together and on task.
- Small focus groups:
 - More influenced by individuals' attitudes and behavior
 - More individual involvement
 - Essential that participants respect each others' input.

Conduct as many focus groups as needed to get clear answers to your study questions. This usually takes three to five focus groups. If you conduct only one or two focus groups, you cannot be sure that the results can be applied to a larger population. Try to strive for at least two groups of similar population segments. For example, it would be better to have two groups of

men, two groups of women, or two groups of both men and women, rather than one group for each segment.

Additional Information

Maintaining flow:

- Do not develop questions for the group that go too far from the research topic. Try to create a flow to your questions instead of grouping them.
- Questions can be more structured (“What is your experience with mammograms?”) or less structured (“We talk a lot about protecting women from cancer. Can you tell me a little bit about what this means to you?”)
- Avoid “why” questions, since they can be seen as accusatory.
- Avoid trying to redirect the group to follow a specific order of questions. If the participants move to a different topic before completing the current topic, you may mention that you will move on in a moment but you would like to talk about the earlier topic a little longer.

Time per focus group: Typically between 1 to 2 hours

Recording: Audiotape and/or videotape your focus group. While you may not need to transcribe the recordings, taping the focus groups means that you don’t have to write copious notes during the session. It allows the moderator to focus on what the participants are saying. Videotaping is useful to see nonverbal cues and to see who is talking.

Informed consent: Participants will need to sign an informed consent. The consent should be:

- Written in plain language,
- Clearly state that they can choose to stop at any time without penalty,
- Clearly state who will have access to the recording tapes, and
- State that their participation is anonymous except for those persons just listed.

It does not need to share research questions or details about the topic. It must state just that the information will be collected and used to look at a particular research topic. Please refer to your institution’s informed consent forms when writing your own informed consent.

Site selection: Choose a location that will be most convenient and comfortable for the participants and one in which you can record the group. Be aware of seating arrangements. Everyone should be seated around the table and have a clear view of the rest of the group.

Analysis:

- Find themes within and among the focus groups.
- Develop a code sheet based on the identified themes.
- Be aware of what participants find important versus what they find interesting.

Debrief: Often in focus groups information that is not accurate is shared to the extent that it is serious enough to need clarification. Therefore, you may want to debrief at the end of the focus groups. Some moderators feel it is ethical to convey correct information before participants leave.

Problem Solving

Participant that dominates the group: Acknowledge what the participant has said since you do not want to discourage him or her from further participation (e.g., “Thank you for sharing your experience” or “That is very interesting”). Then ask if anyone has something to add to what was said or that is different from what was said. If the dominating group member continues to take over the conversation, you may want to say something more direct like “I would like to see if anyone else has something to share.”

A participant that does not talk: Encourage people to share experiences that are different from what others have said. In the introduction you may want to say specifically that you would like to hear whether someone’s thoughts or feelings are different from the group. You do not want to put anyone in an awkward position. However if you notice that a participant is not talking but may look like he or she has something to say, you can make the group aware by commenting, “It looks like you had something to say” or “Maybe we can hear from someone who hasn’t commented yet.”

Tangent: You can appoint a participant to keep the conversation on track. Or if the participants stray off the topic, you could comment that while their conversation is interesting, they have gotten a little off topic.

Disruptive participant: Emphasize the importance of respecting what everyone has to say. If there is a person who threatens the success of the focus group even though he or she has been asked to discontinue the disruptive behavior, you may have to dismiss him or her.